

What has driven the response to the evidence from Rome?

Francis Sullivan, 4 March 2016

This week has been a dreadful time for the Catholic Church in Australia.

The Royal Commission finished hearing evidence into the Melbourne Archdiocese and all but finished with the Ballarat Dioceses including the Christian Brothers. The hearings culminated with a marathon four-day evidence session from Cardinal Pell via videolink from Rome. By any measure it was a gruelling experience for all.

The interest, commentary and temperature around this past four days has never been greater – both here and internationally.

So what has driven this?

Firstly, Ballarat and the parts of Melbourne that were investigated by the Commission are at the very epicentre of child sexual abuse within the Church in Australia. More crimes and cover-ups are associated with these two places over more years than anywhere else in Australia.

Secondly, the administrations of Archbishop Little in Melbourne and Bishop Mulkearns in Ballarat clearly failed in dealing with two of the Church's most high profile and appalling offenders – Peter Searson in Doveton and Gerald Ridsdale in Ballarat. This opened the door to perhaps hundreds of children being abused and, in many cases, damaged for life.

Thirdly, the high profile and extremely effective survivors group which has taken its campaign for justice to the gates of the Vatican. They have attended the hearings in Rome respectfully and did not impact on the Cardinal's evidence. But at the same time they have used the world's media to send a very clear message – justice is still a long way off and much more needs to be done.

Lastly, the marathon appearance of Cardinal Pell, the third most senior cleric in the Vatican and variously a priest and auxiliary bishop during the twenty or so years some of Australia's worst child sex abusers were offending in regions where he worked and lived.

Together these factors have come together to create a perfect storm.

Sitting in the hearing room hearing for both last week's evidence and the evidence from Cardinal Pell has been difficult, difficult for survivors, difficult for Catholics and I assume difficult for the lawyers and the Commission itself.

I have come out of the hearing angry at the appalling behaviour of too many senior church leaders, saddened to hear again about the abuse suffered by so many little children at the hands of those dressed as priests and brothers.

What becomes clearer and clearer every time we sit through a hearing and every time we hear the horrendous stories of abuse is the need for an independent redress scheme, the need for uniform child protection laws across the country, new approaches to the way in which survivors can access the courts and more rigorous child protection standards for all institutions including the Catholic Church.

There is little we can do about the abuse of the past other than ensure everything has been revealed and the survivors are treated fairly with respect and dignity.

What we can and must do is continue to work as hard as possible to ensure every child in a Catholic school, parish, home, welfare organisation, hospital or other facility is safe. And that goes beyond the very minimum child protection standards but must include that they are loved, are cared for and are valued.

admin@tjhcouncil.org.au

+61 2 6234 0900

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